DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 722 IR 002 964

AUTHOR Meyer, Robert S.
TITLE Surveying the Information Needs of a Specific Business/Economic Community.
PUB DATE Jul 75
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference (San Francisco, California, July 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Business; *Information Needs; Library Services; *Library Surveys; Public Libraries; Public Relations; Questioning Techniques; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS ALA 75

ABSTRACT

Special circumstances surround the surveying of businessmen's information needs. The businessman's characteristics must be considered; he is pragmatic and practical is time-oriented, has simple and basic information needs, is probably unaware that the public library can help him, has limited and specialized information resources, and uses a variety of external information sources. The most appropriate techniques must be used for making preliminary contacts, selecting questions to ask, choosing interview personnel, selecting interviewees, convincing the businessman that he should be interviewed, conducting the interview, and concluding the interview. Surveys should be ongoing and continuous if user-oriented library service is to be maintained. (LS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122722

Business Reference Services Committee
Reference and Adult Services Division
American Library Association

Surveying the Information Needs of a Specific Business/Economic Community

Robert S. Meyer
Robert S. Meyer & Associates
Walnut Creek, California

(The following are remarks delivered at the Business Reference Service Committee's program, "Identifying and Responding to the Information Needs of the Business/Economic Community," presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference, July 3, 1975, in San Francisco.)

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

I'm going to assume that you all have access to publications on general survey techniques, so we won't rehash all those; they are easily available in libraries and bookstores. I believe that what we should talk about are the special circumstances that surround a survey of the business community--what's different about surveying the business community from any other type of survey?

There is not much reading matter in the literature on this topic, the day-to-day problems that are encountered, solutions that have been devised, and what works and doesn't work. It's like sex in earlier times--you have to learn it in the streets. There is another analogy, for those of you that may be offended by that one: consultants and surveyors are like magicians--they don't want to reveal their secrets. We don't want to tell you how the tricks are done; we want to preserve an air of mysticism. However, this time, I've decided to take you backstage to see how we do our tricks. In 15 minutes you're all going to be accomplished surveyors.

II. WHAT CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS FIRMS ARE IMPORTANT TO KNOW IN SURVEY PLANNING?

A. Personal characteristics of businessmen.

The first thing we have to understand is the nature of the businessmen you will be talking to. What's special about them, as distinguished from other sectors of society? What should you know before you go into the business community that will help you conduct your survey more effectively? I have identified three traits that I think are important:

1. He is practical and pragmatic. The primary thing that we can say about business people is that they want results, and they are not particularly interested in how you get them. The library is just another vendor to them; they deal with vendors all day long. The library provides information, so it is a vendor. What implications arise from that fact, for you as a surveyor? Librarians offering service to the business community should forego their customary role as the educator, the uplifter, the enlightener, the missionary to the general community. You have to assume the role of service--that's all that counts, and that's all that the other vendors try to provide when they deal with the businessman. But don't underestimate the businessman's need and use of information; if he doesn't use the public library, he is getting the information that he needs from other sources.

IR002 964

It is important that you try to understand the businessman and the world he lives in. Your goal in the survey is rappert with him, and you have to work at that. A word of caution here: don't go out and promise what you can't deliver. If you promise it, he will try you once, and if you don't deliver, you may not see him again; he has to follow that practice with all the venders he deals with. So if your library isn't serious about putting the kind of money and manpower into a business service that is going to try to serve the real needs of the businessman, then don't imply to him that you are. But if you really are serious about it, then you have something to sell which he needs.

2. He is time-oriented. Time is money, as the old saying goes; business people believe it, for they know it's true. What are the implications of that fact? You don't waste time during the interview—you get right to business. You must project the image of efficiency, red-tape cutting, and simplicity of procedures, with shorter delay times than we are accustomed to in the library. Librarians often take a more cosmic view of the world, where people can wait a couple of weeks or months for something they want, but the businessman cannot really do that.

3. His needs are simple and basic. A characteristic of the businessman that is surprising to many librarians, is that his informational needs are generally simpler than we have been led to believe. He very rarely requires the sophisticated machinery, the facsimile transmission, or the instantaneous access that computers provide. Be prepared to discuss very basic things about library service with him, such as: can he get a borrower's card if he is a non-resident? Is there parking at the library? What kinds of telephone service are available? Remember, he deals with all his other venders by telephone; he orders by telephone—can you deliver by telephone? That's the level where our attention is required, the basic services we have to be able to provide the business community before we even start thinking about the more sophisticated types of library services.

B. Their awareness of libraries.

One of the major findings of our user studies is that the average businessman does not know that the public library can help him; he doesn't even know that you want to, that you're interested in helping him. He thinks you have other goals and purposes in mind. We learned the somewhat surprising fact that most businessmen are users of the public library, however, for non-business purposes. Even the frequent public library users are unaware that you are interested in helping their businesses. What are the implications of that fact to you? You are doing a selling job when you do your survey; you want to project the idea that the public library can help, and wants to help. You won't have to say so in those words, as he will get the message through your attitude, the questions you ask, and the remarks you make in your conversation, that you are going to try your darndest to get him what he needs as rapidly as it can be done. The very fact that you are conducting a survey of his information needs is eloquent in itself.

C. Internal information resources used by the businessman.

1. They are limited, decentralized, and part-time. Contrary to the prevailing image that all businessmen are wealthy and have large staffs of people who do nothing but search out information for them, you will find that the average business person has information resources that are very limited, that are quite decentralized within the firm, and that whoever is taking care of any kind of collection is doing so as a part-time duty in addition to other regular duties. So don't expect a formal information setup when you go into a business firm, but on the other hand, don't underestimate what the firm does have in regard to information.

2. They are specialized. Whatever information resources they do have on the premises will be highly specialized, perhaps even authoritative. They may have more publications in their specialties than any public library is likely to have. The implications of that fact are that (a) you generally cannot help the businessman in his field of specialization, but (b) he needs a great deal of help in peripheral areas and in general reference, which is of course a library's stock in trade. You have an important contribution to make in supplementing his own specialized collections. There is also a reciprocal relationship that is possible, but which is not utilized nearly as often as it might be: business firms can help the library in solving information questions the library receives. Practically every firm in our survey said it would be happy to answer questions from the library that fall into its fields of expertise.

D. External information resources used by the businessman.

This topic is of particular importance to the library, which can be used by the businessman as his aid to the use of other external information sources. When you discuss external information resources with the businessman, be prepared for a wide variety of sources, including some surprises. We found that in Pasadena and Pomona, the most frequently named source was the Chamber of Commerce. Another very important information source, which many librarians may be unaware of, is the businessman's supplier of materials and equipment; many suppliers have established information organizations within their firms that are designed for just this purpose, the provision of information to their customers.

The businessman also uses government agencies to supply information to him. He uses libraries of all types—academic, special, and, maybe least of all, public libraries. He gets needed information from college professors and laboratories, individual specialists and consultants, trade and professional associations, and even customers and competitors!

What is the implication of all this to you? What role should the public library play in providing information services to the businessman? You should not compete with these other sources, those informal, highly efficient, specialized, resources that he uses, nor should you ignore them, but you should supplement and complement them. For example, the public library and the Chamber of Commerce can cooperate fruitfully with each other, trading questions and answers to help one another as well as the business person. Libraries can also provide directories whereby the businessman can more easily learn of the laboratories, specialists, consultants, and associations that might be of expert assistance to him. You can subscribe to the publications of the associations, and retain them for reference purposes. In fact, for most of the types of external information resources the businessman might use, the public library can be of real assistance in helping him to identify, locate, and learn more about them.

III. WHAT SURVEY TECHNIQUES WOULD BE MOST APPROPRIATE TO THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY?

A. What preliminary activities should be conducted?

Before the survey begins, publicity is important, especially through the newspapers and trade publications, telling the business community that you are coming, and what the survey is all about. Preparing the way for your calls and visits will be of considerable help in securing the cooperation of the business people you will want to see. The Chamber of Commerce can be helpful in many ways, such as providing publicity for your survey, furnishing directories of firms, and using its influence upon its members to enlist their cooperation.

B. Should you use personal interviews or mailed questionnaires?

This is an important question that comes up in every survey. The personal interview gives you more penetrating information, a much higher percentage of response, and less misunderstanding of questions, but it is more time-consuming. The mailed questionnaire gives you much wider coverage and a lower unit cost, but the level of information you get is more superficial, the danger of the respondent misunderstanding the questions is much higher, and there is the basic problem of non-respondents. A 20 percent return on a mail survey is considered good, but you have to wonder about the other 80 percent who didn't respond.

So my recommendation for a survey of the business community is to conduct as many interviews as you can, not only for the above reasons, but also for the personal contacts that you will establish, the knowledge you will gain from the interviews, their public relations value, and the fact that the benefits from the contacts you will make will last beyond the survey itself. Communities that have a very large business sector can profitably utilize a mail survey to supplement the interview survey. We have found that employing a combination of the two survey techniques can preserve their individual benefits while minimizing their individual shortcomings.

C. What types of questions should you ask?

Each question must have a real purpose; it should justify its presence on the questionnaire. Don't forget, time is money, so don't waste your time and the respondent's time on questions that aren't really important to what you need to know. Avoid the use of jargon terms. Don't use words like circulation, vertical files, serials, etc., as these are foreign-language terms to non-librarians.

Should you have multiple-choice or open-ended questions? This is a decision you will have to face for every question you will want to ask. The multiple-choice question has the advantage of being easier to code, record, and tabulate, but it forces the respondent into a pre-fabricated framework of your own choosing, which may not represent reality. You may miss out on a lot of information he could have provided you in his own words, but not in yours. I recommend the open-ended question, but there is a price you have to pay for that. You have much harder work to do in analyzing the data and collecting similar answers together into a single paraphrased response that truly represents the answers you have grouped together, but the richness of the information you obtain makes it worth the extra effort.

This is not the kind of survey where statistical precision is paramount, as in a television audience rating or a pre-election poll. You really want information of a qualitative nature almost more than quantitative, so you should be willing to rephrase questions as needed for various respondents, in order to get the desired information. In fact, for this type of survey, I often design the "questionnaire" to consist merely of a list of topics, rather than questions. Care and attention must be given to the choice of topics, and to their sequence, so as to maximize their relevance and logical arrangement to the interviewee, but their exact wording is relatively unimportant as long as you can be certain that the respondent understands exactly what you are asking about.

D. Who should do the interviewing?

In most public opinion surveys, students and housewives are trained to be interviewers, but this practice is not appropriate for in-depth surveys of this type. The interviewer must be (1) knowledgeable about the library and what it can do for the businessman, (2) able to explain the interview questions and library services effect-

ively, and (3) able to establish rapport with the respondent which will lead to a continuing future relationship. Remember that it's more than a survey, it's a selling trip as well. What does this tell us about the people who should do the interviewing? It must be done by the business library staff itself—you are the ones who must acquire, assimilate, and utilize the knowledge gained from the interviews, and you are the ones who can best represent the business section of the public library. It's part of your job, the way I see it, to get out from behind your desk and get out there in the real world where your prospective customers are. For certain situations, you may wish to employ outside consultants, such as for large surveys, or surveys that are preliminary to establishing a business library service, or if the staff lacks the time to conduct a survey.

E. Who should be interviewed?

The first question here is the selection of the firms to be included in your survey. The answer is determined by your survey objectives—are you interested in firms of particular types, sizes, products, services, locations, etc., or do you want a cross-section of all firms, or perhaps some other type of selection? The sampling procedure need not be entirely random for a qualitative survey, as distinguished from a statistical or quantitative one. You may select those firms which possess the kinds of characteristics that you particularly want, to satisfy the special objectives of your survey, but of course you may not deliberately bias your selection to achieve a pre-determined result that you may desire for some private purpose.

We've been talking about interviewing firms, but you can't interview a firm, you have to interview some person—who should that be? The best procedure is to start at the top. Try to reach the top person on the phone, and explain the survey to him; if he is willing to see you, that's fine. If he wants to delegate the task to a subordinate, you should accept that, if it sounds reasonable. But if you think he has misunderstood, or if the person he suggests really isn't at the level you need for a discussion of company information requirements, then you should discuss the matter further with the top official, to be sure you are going to be able to talk to the right person at the right level. If the company has a librarian, which is true for a small percentage of firms, then you should interview the librarian, because the management has already made its decision as to who is going to handle information for the firm.

F. How can you talk him into being interviewed?

This question is always important to us, because we want to get the interview and don't want to have the door slammed in our faces. First of all, like any salesman, you must believe in the importance of your product. You must have confidence in what you are doing, and that it is worthwhile. Make him feel that it is important—tell him that he can help you plan the service to accommodate his needs, which is true. Don't accept his usual instinctive response that he would have little to offer because he rarely uses the library, and that you really ought to be talking to someone else. Tell him that he does have his own viewpoints and experiences to relate to you, and that you really would appreciate a few minutes of his time.

Explain how his firm was selected to be in the survey, and why his firm is important to the survey; use flattery if you have to. If you have been referred to a subordinate by the boss, be sure to tell the subordinate that, as then he cannot resist seeing you. You should telephone for appointments in advance; don't just walk in the door expecting an immediate interview. Plan your survey for your geographic convenience; try to do several interviews in the same general area if you can. When you call for an appointment, have a particular day and time to suggest, but if the respondent prefers a different day or time, you will have to accept his preference in order to get the interview.

G. How should you conduct the interview?

Remember that he is time-oriented; have everything ready before entering the doors of the firm--your business card, clipboard, pencils, questionnaire form with basic data filled in at the top--so that you can get right down to business. Be friendly, in order to create a continuing relationship. Be alert to rephrase or explain questions when necessary, but also be sure to avoid suggesting or unintentionally "forcing" particular answers from him. Probe tactfully for specifics if his answers are too general for your needs. Take down his responses as verbatim as you can; if you translate them into your own words, you may lose or misrepresent something. You'll have to write like crazy, and use lots of abbreviations, but be sure to fill in those abbreviations and make sense of your scribbles shortly after the interview, or a few days later you may forget what you meant by those squiggles.

H. What things should you do at the end of the interview?

How you leave him is important, because your goal is to establish a continuing relationship, as we have said. Thank him for his time, which you can truthfully say you know is valuable. Ask for his business card, and attach it to your answer sheet, so you will have a record of his name and title, address and phone number, etc. Ask if you should send library information, such as a bibliography or newsletter, to him or to someone else in the firm he may wish to designate, and get the name and title of that person. We have found it a valuable practice to leave one or two library leaflets with him, especially those that have the address, telephone number, and hours of service on them. When he needs something from the library and remembers your visit, you will have made it easy for him to reach you. Ask if he can give you any leaflets about his firm that would help you to understand the company better; he usually will be happy and pleased to do so, and they will be worth reading and keeping in a file at the library.

IV. HOW LONG SHOULD THE SURVEY LAST?

This is a trick question that I threw in to give me the opportunity to tell you that the survey should never end; it should go on forever, and should be part of your daily job. I think it's a good practice, and some librarians have taken this advice, to try to do one interview each morning on your way to work. In that way, you'll get a couple of hundred done every year, and the knowledge and rapport you will gain from the interviews will be priceless. A user survey or market analysis will be very helpful in providing a basis for making intelligent decisions; it increases your understanding of how the library is used; it imparts greater awareness of library programs to the respondents; it creates a positive library image of wanting to help the businessman; it can reveal changes that are taking place in the economic community; it can be used to help evaluate new or proposed programs; it helps keep the library staff informed of user needs; and it creates a user-oriented library service that is aware of its own strengths and weaknesses.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS.

Let us return to the magician analogy that was mentioned in the introductory remarks. Is magic involved here? One might say that there is no magic really involved in this, but consider this for a moment: you are actually going to transform human beings. Businessmen who presently are strangers to the library will become library users, library friends, and library supporters. That sounds like magic, and it is. Now that you know how to do the trick, the rest is up to you.